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# Asado En El Cuero (Barbecue On The Leather)

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ASADO EN EL CUERO (BARBECUE ON THE LEATHER)

by

Bruno Maestrini

B.S., Universidade Católica de Pelotas, 2003

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science Degree

College of Mass Communication and Media Arts  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

ASADO EN EL CUERO (BARBECUE ON THE LEATHER)

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Bruno Maestrini

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

Approved by:

H.D. Motyl Chair

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

BRUNO MAESTRINI, for the Master of Science degree in Professional Media and Media Management Studies, presented on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: ASADO EN EL CUERO (BARBECUE ON THE LEATHER)

MAJOR PROFESSOR: H. D. Motyl

This project shows a little about one of the most famous traditions of Uruguay, Argentina and the south of Brazil: their barbecue. The custom of eating this food goes beyond the simple pleasure of tasting good meat. The salting and roasting of the meat on the fire is one of the oldest habits in the southern part of the continent. In this project, the tradition of the countryside and the urban regions are shown in a variety of ways. The project documents the tradition of the people and shows how they survive in a always changing world.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE GAUCHO AND MEAT

The southern part of South America, more specifically in Uruguay, Argentina and Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost Brazilian state, share similar culture and traditions. The region is known to be home to the gaucho a folkloric character of the flatlands of the southern continent, known as the pampas. The culture of the gaucho is unique to and is still predominant in those regions, although it has changed throughout the years.

Amongst the traditions of the gaucho, the cooking of meat is one of the most important and popular. This type of food is known as the churrasco, in Portuguese, or asado, in Spanish. In general, the modern gaucho still has the necessity of eating meat daily and making a churrascos on a weekly basis. Although still very popular, the origin of this tradition is still unknown to the majority of the gauchos themselves.

One of the oldest and most traditional ways of cooking of the gaucho is the “asado en el cuero”, or “barbecue on the leather”, where a whole cow is cooked on its own skin. This dying art is practiced by not more than a handful of cook, all mostly still in Uruguay. Although there is a large amount of academic publications on the topic of gaucho culture, the interest in the documents is usually restricted to academics and people with specific interest in the topic. Registering in images and translating the information in a way that can be accessed by the general public has both historical and cultural importance.

The gaucho is described by Félix de Azara as “a colonial bootlegger whose business was contraband trade in cattle hides”, he goes on to say that “his work was highly illegal; his character lamentably reprehensible” and “his social standing exceedingly low”. After many years, the gauchos grew in number and “grew to a power which won fear, and even admiration”. According to José Fachel, the gaucho was seen as a dangerous person and was feared by many. He did not have a home and wandered from ranch to ranch working in exchange for food and a roof to sleep under.

The gaucho’s ethnicity is very mixed. Still according to Fachel, the gaucho is predominantly South American Indian, most likely from the Guarani, Minuano, Charrua and Xavante tribes, mixed with African slaves and European immigrants from Spain and Portugal.

In the XVII century, European Jesuits went to South America to catechize the local Indians. They settled around the region that now is Paraguay, north of Argentina, south of Brazil and Uruguay, where they built missions, also known as reductions. The missions were relatively successful and the largest had a few thousand Indians living there. The Jesuits taught the natives agriculture and imported from Europe cattle to help in labor, pulling carts and plowing fields.

Auguste de Saint-Hilaire, a European adventurer that traveled the pampas in the XIX century, wrote in his journals that he came across a woman that had lived with the Jesuits and spoke very fond of them. “Amongst the Indians, I saw only one woman that had lived with the Jesuits, and she pronounces their names

with profound respect; many Guaranis hear their parents or grandparents speak of the Jesuits saying that when they were in charge of the region, it was a time of happiness”.

After the Madrid treaty, in 1750, signed between the Kingdoms of Spain and Portugal and divided America in between the two countries, the missionaries in Rio Grande do Sul refused to leave the region and move to the other side of the Uruguay River. The treaty set the borders between the two kingdom's lands and the missions had to stay in Spanish territory. The Indians revolted and a war, known as the Guaranitic War, broke. This was only ended after the Portuguese destroyed the missions in 1756.

With the destruction of the missions, the cattle, known as chimarrão, was left free to roam the Pampa flatlands for many decades. These wild cattle reproduced and became a source of food and income to the gaucho. According to Carlos Reverbel, “the gaucho appeared, in a primitive form, in the lands around the river Plate. (...) His appearance in Rio Grande do Sul occurred under the influence of large grasslands and huge herds of cattle without an owner. The horseback hunter of chimarrão cattle was so introduced into Rio Grande do Sul, the gaucho.” But the gaucho exists not only in Brazil, but also in Uruguay and Argentina, and all three types have their differences, but the fundamental characteristics are present in all: the horse, the cattle – basis of the gaucho civilization - the roasted meat and bitter mate tea – basis of the alimentation – the leather and the contraband – basis of the gaucho economy, as described by



Reverbel. It is important to add that Brazilian culture in general is very different from what is seen in the southern part of the country. The gauchos have a culture of their own, shared with the southern neighbors of Uruguay and Argentina that gradually is being lost with immigration and influence from the rest of the country.

## CHAPTER 2

### ASADO EN EL CUERO

Since the introduction of the gaucho culture and modern days, a large variety of cooking methods have appeared in the lands of the Pampa. From the traditional indigenous barbecue on the leather to the commercialization to the fancy churrascarias restaurants, all are part of the modern gaucho culture.

The asado en el cuero, or barbecue on the leather, in a free translation, was one of the first types of asados and in these days probably the rarest. Most gauchos have never even heard of it, making even more urgent the documentation of this tradition. In this modality of asado, the cow is cooked all at once, with the skin as a medium of conducting heat, making the meat very tender.

This style of cooked was born out of necessity. The Indians and gauchos were always in imminent danger and cooking the cow still with the skin made it easier to roll the meat up and flee and continue cooking somewhere else.

The Uruguayan José Silveira is one of the last people in the world that still keeps this tradition alive. He has made some improvements, but the essence is still the same.

Silveira himself does the whole cooking and preparation process. First he goes to the field and handpicks the cow he will cook. This selection is done according to how many people will eat, defining the size, and the age and other characteristics of the cow, such as amount of fat, that will heavily influence the taste.

After the selection is made, the chosen cow is shot in the forehead with a 22mm bullet, enough to knock down the cow, but not to kill it instantly. With the heart still pumping, Silveira pulls his knife out and slits the cow's throat, cutting the jugular vein. With the cow still alive, the heart helps pump out all of the blood. It is important to drain all the blood out so the meat will be tender. In less than a minute, the cow is usually dead.

With no more blood in the body, Silveira then starts to cut open the cow. First he tears the skin open with a knife from mouth to tail, then with an axe he removes the sternum bone. Then the cow is hung and the viscera is removed all at once. The viscera are usually saved for other dishes, but are not part of this type of barbecue. He put the cow back down on the floor and continues then to remove one by one the rib bones, then the spine and finally the hip and shoulder bones. At this point, there are no more bones left except for the legs and head, which are usually kept only for esthetical purposes. All the meat and the skin is still there.

The cooking process starts next. It is a lengthy roast, at least 10 hours. Silveira developed a grill system where he lays the cow on and then closes with a second grill on top. In this way, after around 8 hours of cooking, he can safely turn the cow over, so all the liquids will flow and the meat will dehydrate a little.

When the cow is ready, it is typical to eat straight on top of the leather itself, making no distinction in cuts of meat.

Other types of asado include the Brazilian style Fogo de Chão.

Throughout the years, according to Fachel, when the imminent danger dissipated, the gauchos started cutting the cow into pieces and cooking them on wooden spits. The Fogo de Chão, or ground fire, in a literal translation, was then created. This is now known as the tradition countryside style of churrasco and although it is fairly known by the general public, it is rarely done because of the complexity, necessity of space to cook and large amount of people required to eat so much meat.

Silveira also makes Fogo de Chão churrascos, usually in Brazil, because of sanitary laws. In Brazil it is very difficult to make a barbecue on the leather meeting the health laws of the country. The Fogo de Chão, on the other hand uses large cuts of meat, that can be bought through government inspected companies.

In the late 60's the commercialization reached the churrasco in Brazil, where the Churrascaria was born. This type of churrasco, according do Dorlei Alves, is an adaptation of the Fogo de Chão to a domestic pit made by the Italian immigrants in the hill area of the north part of Rio Grande do Sul in a small city called Nova Brescia. Alves, owner of a churrascaria in the city of Pelotas was born in Nova Brescia and he explains that the whole churrascaria business was created because many people from that city were truck drivers and travelled all around the country. Because of their talent in cooking churrasco, they started little by little settling in all corners of Brazil and opening restaurants.

Other types of asado and churrasco also exist in the Pampas, such as the Parrillada, typical of Uruguay, the street vendors and the domestic style.

## CHAPTER 3

### PRESENTATION

This project is presented to the public in an online magazine style. There is text, photographs and video that explain in extent many of the aspects of the gaucho and its relation to the cooking of meat. The Internet format allows a wider amount of information, making it more complete.

The videos published online are small, more or less 3 to 6 minutes, and each explain a specific topic of the gaucho. The short format is easier to trap the audience's attention and also gives the viewer the option to choose what topic to view next. It also allows expanding more on every specific topic, as each one of the videos has a specific webpage of its own.

The online format also allows the addition of new episodes, keeping the website alive and the public's attention, besides always being of free access to the public. Also, the dissemination of the information is made easier.

My future plans involve adding more episodes to the website and the making of a full feature DVD with all the documentaries on the website. The funding of this DVD could be done using the Brazilian government, as this topic is of interest to them.

The whole project is available at the URL [www.bbqontheleather.com](http://www.bbqontheleather.com).

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